

Thursday, March 7, 1963

NOTES ON CLARK'S ISLAND (BY FISHER AMES)

Part II

The Watsons found their little island free from snakes. More important, rats and other vermin were absent. There were no toads, either, until Mrs. Emily Watson, who shared the family passion for flowers, imported some to keep down insect pests in the garden.

The squat immigrants multiplied beyond all expectations. Finally they became a plague. The scythes of the mowers sliced them up by hundreds in the fields which, as one Watson said, were "juicy" with them. They made walking anywhere on the island unpleasant. They invaded houses and drove headlong into the island well from which they were fished out with nets.

By some occult process of nature, snakes began to appear. From a snake's point of view a toad is a delicious and highly nutritious morsel. The new arrivals fell to work with gusto and in time the toad became a rarity. Contemporaneously the snakes diminished gradually in numbers till few were left. So runs the story.

The old well from which generations of islanders drew their water lies in a stone-walled, locust-shaded corner of Well Field between Old House and T'other House, as they were called. Once a careless cow broke through the wooden cover. The job of hoisting her up from the bottom was tough and while they were about it the rescuers thought it a fitting time to give the well a thorough cleaning. One reason was there had been frequent complaints that the water did not taste quite as sweet as formerly.

OBJECTS SALVAGED

An interesting variety of objects was dredged from the old well; several hammers, trowels, spades and other tools; some kitchen utensils, including a coffee pot or two, three ancient hoopskirts, a barrelful of toads, and six pairs of Henry Warden's spectacles.

Mr. Warden, a relative of the Watsons, seems to have been one of those irritating persons who make a habit of mislaying their eyeglasses. Just how or why he should have "mislaid" them in the well remains an unexplained mystery.

The little island had another mystery on its records, one much stranger and more romantic. The story of Mary Willoughby begins in old Salem in days when sailing ships ruled the seas and the town was still a port of consequence.

Captain Willoughby, engaged in trade with the Orient, could pay only brief visits to his wife and Mary, who naturally was presumed to be his daughter. Unlike the rest of the community, the little family was an unknown quantity. Little was known about their history, and Mrs. Willoughby wanted it that way. She was distant with her neighbors and refused to let Mary mingle with other children, except at school.

On one of Captain Willoughby's voyages yellow fever broke out among his crew. The ship's cargo was destined for Boston, but on the way up the bay the Captain stopped at Salem, taking his seachest ashore with him. He had it placed in a nearby field with the intention of submitting it to the purifying effects of a temporary burial, but he sailed for Boston before his order was carried out. He had, however, cautioned his wife to keep away from the chest.

A FATAL MISTAKE

Like Pandora, Mrs. Willoughby could not resist the urge to investigate the forbidden box. She went secretly to the field and opened it. Whether the lifting of the lid freed some hungry germ-bearing mosquitoes or not, it is known that soon afterwards, the poor woman contracted yellow fever and died of it.

Before sailing on his next voyage, Captain Willoughby placed little Mary with one of the neighbors. From time to time more or less irregularly, he sent money for her support. Suddenly the remittance stopped coming, and so did any news of the Captain.

There were rumors that his ship had foundered with all hands

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and cared nothing about the case. Quite possibly some of them would not have welcomed a poor relative who might have a claim on Lady Mary's property.

With no cooperation from England the lawyer was eventually forced to stop proceedings. He was defeated if unconvinced. He was probably much more concerned over his failure than Mary, who was really quite satisfied with her life as it was. She lived to be an old lady, keeping her beauty and charm to the end. The mystery that shrouded her antecedents, like the minor one of Mr. Warden's spectacles, was never solved.

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There were rumors that his ship had foundered with all hands during a storm; that he had been captured by a French privateer and died in a French prison. Whatever the cause of his disappearance no authentic report of it ever reached Salem.

The little orphan was sent to Brookline Poor Farm. Being an attractive child she was soon taken into the home of an elderly couple who decided to adopt her. Before they carried out their promise the fate that seemed to pursue Mary struck again. Death came suddenly to the two old people. Left again without a protector, Mary had to return to the Poor Farm.

About this time a request came to the Farm from Madam Watson of Clark's Island. Did they have a young girl they could recommend as a companion helper? The matron sent Mary on trial.

The Watsons liked Mary at once and liking soon grew to something stronger. Mary gradually ceased to be a servant and became an accepted member of the family. She had found a home at last.

Now the "mystery" concerning Mary Willoughby began. A friend visiting the Watsons was much struck by the girl's looks and air of breeding. She asked a number of questions with the result that the suspicion beginning to be born in her mind was greatly strengthened. It was based on an advertisement she had seen some time before in a newspaper.

A copy of the paper was sent for and there, in the "agony column," was a notice by a Lady Mary Willoughby of England, requesting information concerning her missing granddaughter whom she had reason to believe was in America.

Putting everything together -- the scanty knowledge of Mary's family, the similarity of names, the reference to America in the notice, and the girl's notably English look, all seemed to point to the possibility that Mary might be the missing granddaughter.

Mary laughed at the idea, and the Watsons shared her skepticism. At any rate, nothing was done about it, despite the visitor's insistence. And there the matter rested for years.

It was a lawyer who picked up the threads again. He heard the story and his legal mind saw possibilities in it well worth his attention. Mary was reluctant to have anything to do with the case. She had no faith in a successful outcome, but finally the lawyer persuaded her to become his client.

UNSOLVED MYSTERY

Her judgment proved sounder than his. On communicating with the English Willoughbys, they learned that Lady Mary was dead. Nothing had come of her advertisement and the search for the lost granddaughter had long been abandoned. Lady Mary seemed to have been the only one interested in the matter. Her surviving relations knew

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